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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 DAMASCUS 000390

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SUBJECT: CODEL PELOSI'S APRIL 3-4 VISIT TO DAMASCUS:
MEETING WITH SYRIAN FM WALID MU'ALLIM

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael H. Corbin for reasons 1.4 b/d

11. (C) Summary: Visiting U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and her accompanying delegation met April 4 in Damascus with Syrian FM Walid Mu'allim. They discussed Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, and prospects for a renewed Middle East peace process. End Summary.

12. (C) Speaker Pelosi and 15 members of her delegation met for 50 minutes April 4 with FM Mu'allim at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Aside from Pelosi, those attending the meeting were the following: Congressman Henry Waxman (D-CA); Congressman Nick Rahall (D-WV); Congressman Tom Lantos (D-CA); Congressman David Hobson (R-OH); Congresswomen Louise Slaughter (D-NY); Congressman Keith Ellison (D-MN); Paul Pelosi, the Speaker's spouse; House Sergeant at Arms Wilson Livingood; Mike Sheehy, the Speaker's Assistant for National Security; Reva Price from the Speaker's Office; Nadeam Elshami, the Speaker's public affairs assistant; Robert King, from Congressman Lantos' office; Kenny Kraft, from Congressman Hobson's office; House attending physician ADM John Eisold; and Air Force escort COL Lori Robinson. Also attending at the request of the CODEL were the Charge and an Embassy notetaker. Attending on the Syrian side was Mu'allim's Chief of Cabinet Bassam Sabbagh; MFA head of foreign media Bushra Kanafani; and the Syrian Ambassador to the U.S. Imad Mustapha.

13. (C) OPENING COMMENTS: The Speaker noted that she and her delegation had come in the spirit of friendship and the hope of opening a door to improved relations. "We also bring some concerns in recognition of the importance of Syria," she added. The delegation had just come from Israel where the PM had asked that the delegation convey to the Syrian President "Israel's desire for peace." The U.S. delegation hoped that there would be a reduction in terrorism that would permit steps toward such a peace, Pelosi stated. The Syrian FM responded that he had spent his youth negotiating with the Israelis and that all of the region's people were seeking a comprehensive peace. Mu'allim urged the appointment of a U.S. Ambassador to Syria that would "raise the level of dialogue and bridge the differences between the two countries."

14. (C) ON IRAQ: Congressman Lantos suggested that Syria and the U.S. begin to bridge their differences by addressing a "long list of problems between the two countries from a longer range point of view." Lantos said that the last time he had been in Syria, he had met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and then Syrian FM Farouk al-Shara'a about a list of issues that needed to be handled differently, including

closing the Syria-Iraq border. "This has not changed," Lantos said. Mu'allim responded that Syria opposed the invasion of Iraq, which was conducted without the approval of the UN Security Council. In January 2003, Syria had warned the U.S. against the invasion, "but no one listened," Mu'allim said. Syria now wants a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops, the rebuilding of a national army, and a political solution to the conflict, he said.

15. (C) Mu'allim stated that in any conflict, usually the failure of troops is always blamed on a third country. In 2004, Syria had worked out a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the U.S. military about the Syria-Iraq borders, but the U.S. had failed to follow through, Mu'allim asserted. In late 2006, Syria signed a security MOU with Iraq, and three security committees were set to meet later this month, he said. Syria has a long border with Iraq, said Mu'allim, noting, however, that only five percent of those fighting in Iraq are foreigners and most of them are from Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Egypt. "We can't unilaterally seal the border," said Mu'allim noting that Syria needs assistance from the Iraqis, who are prevented from doing so by the U.S. As proof, Mu'allim cited private comments to this effect by Iraqi President Jalal Talabani during a week-long visit in mid-January to Damascus. The Speaker retorted that given Syria's security forces, it was hard to believe that the SARG could not stop facilitators from moving foreign fighters through Syria to Iraq. Mu'allim queried, "In the absence of dialogue, why should we do it?" The Speaker responded, "We're here to dialogue."

16. (C) ISRAELI PRISONERS AND THE PEACE PROCESS: Congressman Hobson said that Syria and the U.S. share common goals and

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that without dialogue, nothing happens. He urged Syria to set a helpful tone with the international community by urging Palestinian Hamas to release Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit captured in the summer of 2006 and to press Lebanese Hizbollah to release Israeli soldiers Ehud Goldwasser and Eldad Regev kidnapped in July 2006. This would "send a signal of humanity," Hobson said. The FM Minister responded by urging the Speaker to appoint an Israeli-authorized mediator from the U.S. Congress to negotiate for the release of the Hizbollah prisoners, adding, "Syria is ready to pressure Hizbollah; we can work with you." For 27 years, however, Syria has also had 20 Syrian prisoners in Israel, the FM said. One died in 2006 and another was about to pass away, he said.

17. (C) When the Speaker held up the dog-tags of the three Israeli prisoners being held by Hamas and Hizbollah the FM responded, "Know that Syria will help on all humanitarian issues, but the way to solve all of the suffering is through a comprehensive peace." Syria's Golan Heights is small in size but symbolically important, he said. "Let's do land for peace." Syria negotiated over the course of 10 years for the land and was willing to return to the negotiation table," he said.

18. (C) LEBANON: Congressman Rahall noted his Lebanese origins and cited the delegation's previous stop in Beirut. While the political situation in Lebanon was complicated, at least some Lebanese people were clear in their desire to be free of Syrian domination. Mu'allim responded that the U.S. interferes in Lebanese affairs. Rahall continued that both Syria and Lebanon need a stronger diplomatic relationship and asked for the FM's predictions on Lebanon's future. Mu'allim responded that Lebanon was democratic but different in terms of its sectarianism from Western democracies. Lebanon needs a National Unity Government, which can reach consensus on issues, he said. Syria would then be willing to establish diplomatic relations and begin demarcation of the borders, Mu'allim said. Otherwise, by dealing with the government of PM Fouad Siniora, Syria would only support part of Lebanon, the FM asserted.

¶9. (C) The Speaker interjected that waiting for consensus and blocking a meeting of the Lebanese Parliament to avoid the establishment of a proposed International Tribunal did not move issues forward. Mu'allim repeated that there were many foreign players in Lebanon. The Speaker retorted that Hizbollah was a major player, getting its weapons from Iran through Syria. The FM responded that even the Lebanese PM and Defense Minister had publicly declared this as false and that Syria had unsuccessfully asked the Germans for technical equipment to monitor the border. "Lebanon got it, but not us," he said. He argued that Syria borders Iraq where there is a conflict and Israel with which Syria is at war. Syria can only police its border with technical assistance, Mu'allim said.

¶10. (C) EMBASSY SECURITY: Congressman Waxman, who has visited Syria twice previously, raised the issue of Embassy security. The FM responded that the SARG was responsible to protect foreign embassies and that the U.S. was responsible to protect the Syrian missions in the U.S. The U.S. Mission could rent another building at a separate location if its personnel felt unsafe at the current location, "which was bad," he said. The SARG, however, took seriously its responsibility of protecting the current Embassy, just as the U.S. was responsible for protecting the Syrian missions in the United States, he said. Congressman Lantos responded, "Your Embassy wasn't attacked."

¶11. (C) IRAN: Congressman Waxman raised Iran's nuclear ambitions, noting that the U.S. feared Tehran was seeking nuclear weapons. The FM responded that Syria opposed nuclear weapons throughout the region.

¶12. (C) PEACE PROCESS: Returning to prospects for a renewed Middle East peace process, Waxman asserted that Syria could be helpful in Lebanon and Israel but that the Israeli PM didn't know how to judge Syrian intentions. Mu'allim said that Syria was serious about returning to negotiations "without preconditions from any side." Waxman called for Syria to take a concrete step toward negotiations by making a gesture, such as Egypt's Sadat did with his 1977 trip to Jerusalem, by obtaining the release of Israeli prisoners.

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The FM responded that Sadat's trip occurred before Madrid and that after 10 years of negotiations "no one was interested in a gesture." Instead, he said, "We want to go to the table and solve the issues. When asked whether Syria would be willing to recognize a Jewish state in Israel, the FM said, "More than that, we are ready to open an Israel Embassy in Damascus." The Israelis know what Syria offered them for the Golan Heights, he said. The U.S. needs to look at the issue from both the Israeli and Syrian side, he continued.

¶13. (C) On Hamas, Congressman Ellison said that in the delegation's April 3 meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, it had understood that Damascus could greatly influence Hamas to act in a positive way. The FM responded, "We have. The National Unity Government was established in Damascus."

¶14. (U) This cable was cleared by CODEL Pelosi after the CODEL's departure from Syria.
CORBIN